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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an assignment that is used in a hybrid speech course to test students' knowledge as well as work toward more application of the interpersonal, small group, and conflict aspects of the course. Discussion is scheduled after the lectures that cover those aspects, and a one-day lecture on the topic of persuasion and sources usually precedes the assignment. The paper explains that students must choose a controversial topic that can be addressed in a problem-solution format (topics should not be duplicated), and a 3-5 minute presentation should be prepared. The paper then outlines other details of the presentation, suggests possible topics, discusses the assignment's results, and defines grading criteria. A handout for students describing the exercise accompanies the paper. (NKA)

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Problem-Solution Mini-Speeches with Student-Led Discussions

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association
(1997)

Leadership Discussion

The Purpose: This assignment is used in a hybrid speech course that is aimed at the freshman and sophomore students but open as a lower level course to the entire university. I was looking for a way to test the students' knowledge as well as work towards more application of the interpersonal, small group and conflict aspects of the course. The discussion is scheduled after the lectures that cover Interpersonal and Small Group Communication. I usually do a one day lecture on the topic of persuasion and sources before this assignment. A test is administered after each of these areas, but I was striving for another applicational aspect of the course.

The Assignment: Students must choose a controversial topic that can be addressed in a problem-solution format. The topic should be one that they feel strongly about. To best involve the students it is essential that the topic be controversial. It is also imperative that the topics cannot be duplicated and closely related topics not be allowed. (i.e. a presentation on smoker's rights should not be allowed if someone has chosen non-smoker's rights. The discussion would be limited for the next speaker.) A 3-5 minute presentation should be prepared that first, defines the problem and provides support that the problem is real and exists in our present world. The topic should be narrowed to fit the time frame and should be manageable. (I.E. "Homelessness in America" is better honed down to Homelessness in my Hometown.") Secondly, the student should then provide a solution or solutions that would best solve the problem.

The Presentation: The entire presentation is "performed" with all the students seated in a circle. To make a smoother transition to the speeches that follow the public speaking section of this course it is essential for the students to be more at ease. I never judge their

delivery --only content and facilitating skills. However, the student is not allowed to read a manuscript and encouraged to adopt an extemporaneous style with a few brief note cards for source citations and the questions. The goal here is to maintain eye contact and elicit a response from the group.

At the close of the "mini-speech", the student should ask pointed questions that will involve their peers in the discussion. For instance, "Do you think this solution will work? If not, why?" The student should have prepared follow-up questions in case there is a stall in the discussion, but for the most part, this discussion is now in the hands (or should I say mouths?) of the student's classmates. The student speaker acts only as a facilitator making sure everyone gets a chance to participate, looking for those who may "hog" the show and drawing out those that have made no contribution. (I find it vital that the students know each other by first name at this point in the course. It makes this assignment so much easier for them.) It is also the facilitator's job to handle any conflict that might arise and the students are encouraged to play the devil's advocate and argue from all viewpoints. Students are highly encouraged to participate actively but with close attention paid to generalizations and stereotypes. I sit in the circle with the students and usually refrain from commenting unless it is a flagrant violation of appropriateness or a huge generalization that someone has overlooked.

Results: The results are incredible! One of my major goals in this course is to enable students to see past their biases and accept other's opinions. And this exercise seems to be working. The assignment covers all the areas that we discuss: listening, nonverbal, self concept, language, conflict, group dynamics, etc. The students love this assignment! They usually comment that they learned more from this assignment than anything else in the course! Minimal research is needed and it helps them overcome those initial fears of public speaking yet helps them with topic development and organization and the beginning stages of research.

Topics: In the area of topics I usually generate a generic list that I give to the students the first day of class. I give them a deadline of topic selection. Due to the nature of the discussion it is important that there is no duplication of topics so choice is based on a first asked first gained basis. When it gets closer to topic deadline time I usually bring in a local paper, the school paper and any other recent news and we discuss the current topics. I try to encourage the students to take on local issues. I also have restricted topics that I feel are overused and I know could cause a major **breakdown in the discussion due** to their value linkage. I list these "forbidden" topics for the students on the handout. You, of course, can choose whatever you like.

Grading Criteria: The assignment is based on 10% of the course grade. The breakdown is usually on a 10 point scale. This of course, can be adapted however you like. I evaluate the student on the following areas:

Clearly defines problem
Provides need for audience to listen

Shows familiarity of subject
Cites qualified sources
Intentionally elicits a response
Maintains control of discussion
Audience interaction managed appropriately
Time limit met

After the presentation is complete, each student critiques the speaker on the same guidelines (Except time) writes this on a half sheet of paper, signs it and passes it around the circle to the instructor. I read over the critiques, being sure to cull out any inappropriate comments and staple them to my critique along with a grade. This aspect of the exercise gives the students a chance to hone their critiquing skills! I never do this without a mini-lecture on "how to evaluate."

The actual handout for the exercise follows. If you have any questions or would like to see a videotape of one of my students' presentations please call me and I will make you a copy

Leadership Discussion

The assignment. Choose a controversial topic from either the list below or from another source that deals with a local, state, national, or international problem. You should choose a topic that you care about as well as one that you can show a direct correlation to the audience. (Why should they know about this topic?) You will then research and prepare a 3-5 minute presentation for class. You must have at least three sources that provide support for both the problem and the solution(s). Your solution(s) should be able to backed by experts in the field.

The presentation:

You will not be evaluated on your delivery but you must be familiar with your topic and you will only be allowed note cards with brief notes. (NO ONE WANTS TO BE READ TO!!!) The class will sit in a big circle and you will sit with them. (not at all like a formal speech) You must present your problem, offer solutions and then turn the discussion over to the class.

The discussion: Once you have spoken 3-5 minutes you will then **become the facilitator and be responsible** for getting them involved. Prepare questions in advance, You will need a specific closed question to get them started and then follow up questions in case the discussion begins to lag. The most important aspect of this part of the discussion is to keep conversation flowing and watch for self-serving group members. You should control the discussion, This is not a debate! You do not have to provide both sides (although you might want to mention them in some instances) nor do you have to answer and rebut each comment from everyone in the class. It is your job to keep the discussion rolling.

Possible topics: There can be no duplication, so choices are based on a first asked, first assigned basis. SIGN UP EARLY!!! You do not have to choose from this list. You are encouraged to find local issues. These topics have not been narrowed and you may need to narrow the topics substantially.

Adoption: Doing away with privacy
Interracial adoption
Drug Testing for Pell Grant Recipients
Drug Rehabilitation
Stricter DUI Laws
Drug Dogs in High Schools
Childcare for the Community: Should the Government Pay?
Social Security's Future
Should We Spend More Money On Space?
Deforestation of National Parks/Wetlands/Everglades, etc.

The Current Plight of the Native American. What Can Be Done?
 Should We Give Military Aid To ?
 Socialized Medicine-Health Care
 Drug Testing for Welfare Recipients
 Paying College Athletes
 Sex Education in Schools
 Minimum Age for Cigarettes Raised?
 Genetic Intervention
 Non Smoker's Rights
 Smoker's Rights
 HIV Positive workers in Food Industry?
 HIV Victims Mainstreamed in Schools?
 Should the Government Spend More on Aids Research?
 Our Overcrowded Prisons: Rehabilitation or other methods
 Oil Spills Mat Can WE Do?
 Offshore Drilling
 Legalization of Steroids for Professional Athletes (or Olympic)
 Drug Abuse of Fetuses
 Hazing in Fraternities/Sororities
 Mandatory Armed Forces Training
 Seat Belt Laws or Helmet Laws
 Regulating the Airlines?
 Our Diminishing Water Supply
 Reinstitution of the Draft
 Should Churches Remain Tax Free?
 Censorship of Music, Art, etc.
 Should Media Reporters Accompany All US Military Operations?
 Income Tax-a New Method?
 Should the President be Elected by Popular Vote?

Or any other controversial topic that is of importance. All topics must be approved by the instructor. To avoid serious value conflict and overused topics please refrain from the following:

Capital Punishment
 Abortion
 Cruelty to Animals
 Euthanasia
 Any Religious Beliefs